LOVE'S PRACTITIONERS

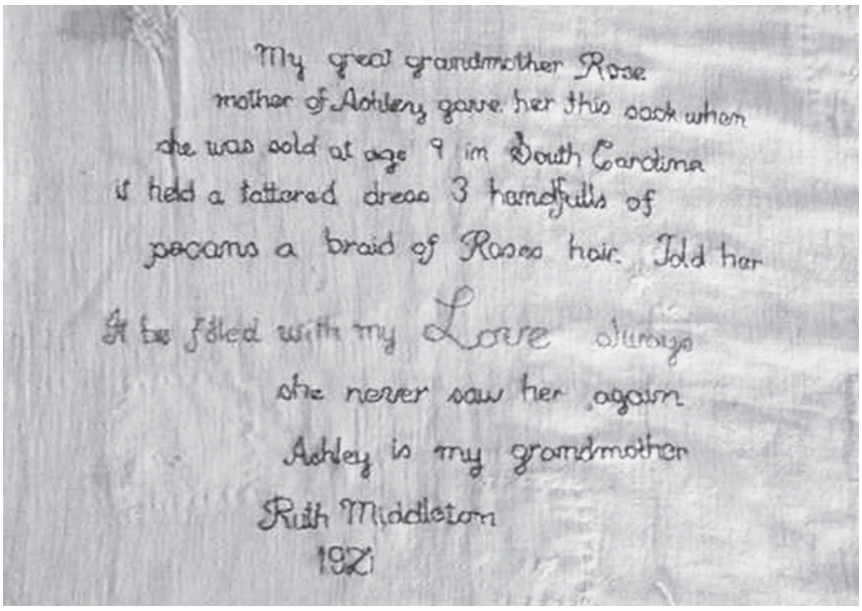
'In African American life black women have been love's practitioners.'
—bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love,* 2001

We forget that love is revolutionary. The word, cute and overused in American culture, can feel devoid of spirit, a dead letter suitable only for easy exchange on social media platforms. But love does carry profound meanings. It indicates the radical realignment of social life. To love is to turn away from the prioritization of the ego or even one's particular party or tribe, to give of oneself for another, to transfigure the narrow "I" into the expansive "you" or "we." This four-letter word asks of us, then, one of the most difficult tasks in life: decentering the self for the good of another. This is a task for which we need exemplars, especially in our divisive times. Here in these pages, we take up a quiet story of transformative love lived and told by ordinary African American women—Rose, Ashley, and Ruth—whose lives spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, slavery and freedom, the South and the North. Their love story is one of sacrifice, suffering, lament, and the rescue of a tested but resilient family lineage.

By loving, Rose refused to accept the tenets of her time: that people could be treated as property, that wealth was a greater value than honor, that some lives had no worth beyond capital and gain. Hers is just one telling example of refusal from the collective experience of enslaved Black women, who practiced love and preserved life when all hope seemed lost. Even when she relinquished her daughter to the slave trade against her will, Rose insisted on love. Despite and during their separation, Rose's value of love prevailed. The emotional bond between mother and daughter held longevity and elasticity, traversing the final decade of chattel slavery, the chaos of the Civil War, and the red dawn of emancipation before finding new expression in the early twentieth century just as a baby girl, the fifth generation of Rose's lineage, Ashley's great-granddaughter, was born.

Just as remarkable as this story of women who dared to insist on love is how we have come to know about it. Rose's testament, as told by Ruth, is preserved on an antique sack that once held grain or seeds. Traces of the abused and adored, the devalued and the salvaged, the

lost and the found accrue in this one-of-a- kind object. A mother bears the sacrifice of her daughter; a daughter carries on amid unspeakable loss; a descendant heaves the harrowing tale into the twentieth century; and we have the chance to be the better for its arrival here on our doorstep. Through the medium of the sack, we glimpse the visionary fortitude of enslaved Black mothers, the miraculous love Black women bore for kin, the insistence on radical humanization that Black women carried for the nation, and the immeasurable value of material culture to the histories of the marginalized. Although Black women have been treated like "the mules of the world," in the words of writer Zora Neale Hurston, this sack bears them up as at times exemplifying, to borrow Abraham Lincoln's phrase on the precipice of the Civil War, the "better angels of our nature."



Ruth Middleton's embroidery on Ashley's sack, a gift from Rose. Courtesy of the Middleton Place Foundation.

Ruth Middleton, a lineal descendant of Rose, embroidered the lines that follow on what Ruth identified as the original cotton sack Rose packed.

My great grandmother Rose
mother of Ashley gave her this sack when

she was sold at age 9 in South Carolina
it held a tattered dress 3 handfulls of
pecans a braid of Roses hair. Told her
It be filled with my Love always
she never saw her again
Ashley is my grandmother
Ruth Middleton
1921

With these words a granddaughter, mother, sewer, and storyteller imbued a piece of fabric with all the drama and pathos of ancient tapestries depicting the deeds of queens and goddesses. She preserved the memory of her foremothers and also venerated these women, shaping their image for the next generations. Without Ruth, there would be no record. Without her record, there would be no history. Ruth's act of creation mirrored that of her great-grandmother Rose. Through her embroidery, Ruth ensured that the valiance of discounted women would be recalled and embraced as a treasured inheritance.

The stained antique fabric once grasped in Ruth Middleton's hands now hangs in an underground case at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), in Washington, D.C. The artifact, which is on loan from its current institutional owner, the Middleton Place Foundation in Charleston, South Carolina, immediately takes hold of those who view it. Ruth's intellectual work of interpreting Rose and Ashley's story and her handiwork in stitching it onto the sack in color produce a composite object of arresting visual and emotional impact. A testament to the national past fashioned of many thinning threads, it has an effect subtler yet more moving than the stone monuments built for pro-slavery statesmen and Confederate generals that have been widely contested in recent years. Those memorials, erected to bury a nation's sin, were made to be larger than life to command a presence in national memory. At the same time, though, Confederate monuments undermined the aspirational principles of America's founding: freedom, equality, and democracy. Ashley's sack makes no such pretense to vainglory. It does not have to. A quiet assertion of the right to life, liberty, and beauty even for those at the bottom, the sack stands in eloquent defense of the country's ideals by indicting its failures.

The sack crystallizes the drama of a region and a nation torn apart by the moral crisis of human sale and forced separation. But it also possesses a quality so tangibly intimate and personal that it filters a light of remembrance on the viewer's own familial bonds, leading any

of us to ask what things our own families possess that connect us to our past and to wonder what we might gain from the contemplation of that connection. Such is the capacious nature of Ashley's sack that it can call hearts to attention while also speaking to local, regional, and national histories. Although the bag's material contents have long been lost, its essential provision—love of a mother for her daughter—still remains. Every turn in the sack's use—from its packing in the 1850s, to its tending across the dawn of a century, to its embroidering in the 1920s—reveals a family endowment that stands as an alternative to the callous capitalism bred in slavery. In the face of the base commercialization of their own bodies, these Black kinswomen cared for one another, preserving the next generations by provisioning their perseverance and remembering the past generations who defended their right to life. As the women in Rose's lineage carried the sack through the decades, the sack itself bore memories of bondage and bravery, genius and generosity, longevity and love.

STORY CLOTHS

My own grandmother's voice travels across warm breezes on a hilly side street in Cincinnati, Ohio. I am nine years old, or twelve and a half, or twenty-one.

"Lord only knows what we woulda done if she hadn't saved that cow."

Grandmother has told this story countless times to me, her rapt audience of one, and to other women relatives in private moments over the years. Her dark eyes peer at me with the light of love behind her oversized men's glasses, the sort that come cheapest with her Medicare plan. She does not need glamour or fanfare. The red brick porch of the Craftsman cottage is her stage. She sits on her lounger with the metal frame, its pillows changed out many times and now mismatched in shape and pattern. Her skin is the honey of bees' combs, soft as crepe and just as creased. Her hair is a wreath of pressed cotton, once black, now white. A sleeveless, pale blue shift drapes to her calves, exposing ankles swollen from a lifetime of domestic labor in others' homes and agricultural labor on others' farms. She leans back and folds her hands across the broad moon of her belly, which birthed six babies in Mississippi and seven more in Ohio. In the summertime, she keeps a cool drink on the ledge of the porch wall—lemonade or sun tea sealed in a Mason jar. She reaches for the cooling liquid, wets her lips, and continues. She is my first storyteller, the one who tends me when I am sick, the one who bakes my favorite rice pudding. She is my beloved.

“If it wasn’t for my sister Margaret,” my grandmother preaches, “we woulda had nothin’ left.”

This was the defining story of my grandmother’s childhood in Mississippi. It told of a fragile family and a brave Black girl. My maternal grandmother, Alice Aliene, was born in Lee County to a mother much younger than her father. Her father, Price, was tall as an oak, with bark-dark skin. He had “eyes like an eagle’s,” to hear my grandmother tell it, which she claimed he got from a “half-Indian parent.” Price had been born into slavery’s last days. He told my grandmother, and she told me, that he had been sold away from his mother. Maybe this is why the 1870 federal census lists Price as an eight-year-old alone, with no guardian or family.

My grandmother’s mother, Ida Belle, was the yin to Price’s yang, youthful, light-skinned, with long raven hair “swinging down her back.” This mother, romanticized in the adoration of my grandmother’s words, had somehow come from means. Ida Belle had been born in St. Louis; she could read and write; she could figure with numbers. Ida Belle’s father was white and unnamed in my grandmother’s stories. Ida Belle’s mother had had no choice about this intimacy. “When those white men wanted to go with you,” my grandmother explained to me, “you went.” Ida Belle had a bit of money, a set of gold-edged plates (now in my mother’s display case), and even twenty-five acres of land in her possession. Price, Ida Belle, and their splitting-the-seams farm family of nine were getting by in rural Mississippi, the state that had harbored the worst forms of torturous, Cotton Belt slavery and would later see the gruesome murders of three civil rights workers in 1964’s Freedom Summer. They farmed 165 acres, produced between 25 and 30 bales of cotton per year, and made around $100 to $125 per bale. They had “plenty to eat” back in the 1920s, my grandmother said, and lived “comfortable” on their land. She remembered their white house with the big hallway, long porch with a double swing, “fifteen to twenty head of cows,” glossy green vegetable garden, and fruit cobblers cooling in the kitchen.

And then the family fell into debt, owing someone around fifty or sixty dollars. White men came from town, riding on horses. They appeared armed with papers that they insisted Price must sign. This was a trap. While Ida Belle could have read the contract, Price had never been educated. My grandmother inserts this detail into the story as if it might have made a difference, as if Ida Belle might have marched down to that road in a long skirt and flour-sack apron, ferreted out the secret intention, and prevented the family’s financial downfall. But I know after twenty-five years of studying Black women’s history, and my grandmother must have known from experience as she told me the story back then, that a

Black woman was better off hidden than smart when white men came calling in pre–civil rights Mississippi. “I remember seeing her standing on the porch crying,” my grandmother said of her mother. Price signed the documents with his *X*. Weeks later, the men returned, claiming that Price had relinquished the farm. Who knows what the black marks on those papers really conveyed? The truth became irrelevant the moment those men returned with guns.

My grandmother’s words pick up speed and seem to chase each other now as she tells the story, or maybe it is my memory that blurs the details. All is panic. Who runs to hide? Who stands by as witness? Price argues with the men. Ida Belle flies to locate her young ones. The children cower. The dogs warn. The family evacuates as alarm evolves into knowing fear.

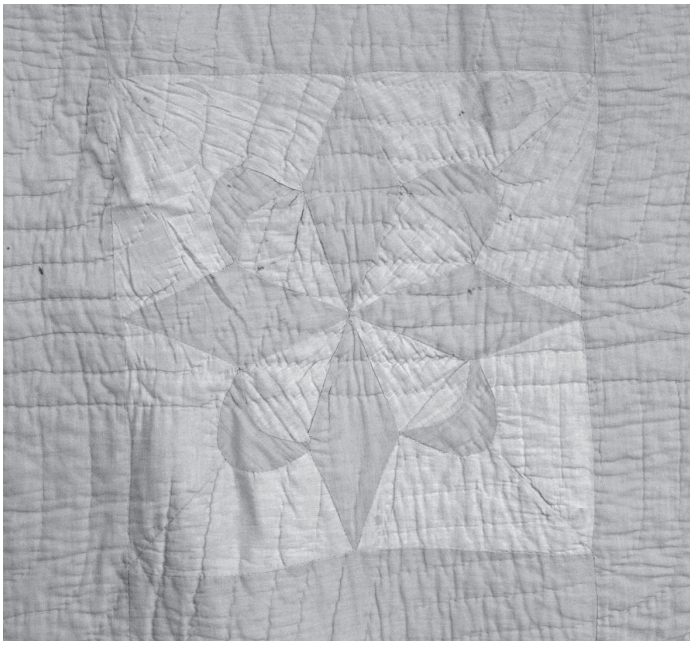
They were being evicted by the Law of the South, which is to say by white supremacist whimsy. They had little time to think or plan, to collect and pack their necessities. They grabbed at dishes, blankets, clothing but lost all of their wealth, which was the land itself, the farmhouse, and the livestock. The men took the family’s cows, which had belonged to Ida Belle. “I never will forget them, in the wagon with the horses, going on down the road,” my grandmother told me. But my grandmother’s sister Margaret, she was shrewd and she was quick. While commotion raged at the front door, Margaret slipped out the back, fetched a cow from the pasture, and led it over to the farm of Old Man Rose. He helped them, later allowing the family to rent one of his houses. My grandmother never mentioned his race.

That cow was the only thing of significant value rescued from my ancestors’ farm besides their lives. The expulsion drove my grandmother’s family into poverty. This poverty, this pressure, this unrelenting fear of loss would later push my grandmother to marry young and migrate, out of the jaws of the Jim Crow South and into the teeth of the segregated North. But the act of strength and daring shown by Margaret that day enriched them in spirit despite their woes. This is how I remember my grandmother telling it. My great-aunt Margaret, only a teen, saved the day. And my grandmother wrapped the moment up in a silk sleeve of artful story.

I never had the chance to meet this dauntless aunt. I have never even glimpsed a picture of her. But I had seen and touched and admired the work of her hands, a connection just as powerful. My grandmother kept a quilt in her bedroom that Margaret had stitched sometime after the ouster. The quilt bears an appliqué fan design: rose and mint-colored circles and ovals alternating with a regularity broken only by shifts in shade. The backing has cobalt and powder-blue polka dots on a vanilla-cream background that brings to mind the

sweet smells of an ice cream parlor. Margaret had folded a blue-dot border onto the edges of the appliqué side, mixing the mild pastel fans with an altogether different feel that smacked of modernist dots and splotches. She imposed what did not fit onto her visual canvas, the mark of a creative soul as well as a rebel. This girl, whom I would never know except through stories handed down, was both a maker and a savior. She is remembered in family lore in a way that reflects regional history tinged by archetypal myth.

I inherited my great-aunt's quilt when my grandmother passed away, more than fifteen years ago. The quilt was for my grandmother, and is for me, a treasured textile. It



seems to have absorbed into its fibers the intangible essence of a past time. When I gaze at the vibrant colors of this quilt (including stains of an ancestor's blood), I see my grandmother as a girl and imagine the faces of her kin. I feel each syllable of that many-eyed monster, Mississippi—a place where heat, terror, and love intertwined. The story of Margaret saving the cow fused with the quilt's material. The most traumatic event of my grandmother's childhood is embedded in it. The history of Africans in America is brutal, but we have made art out of pain, sustaining our spirits with sunbursts of beauty, teaching ourselves how to rise the next day.

Great-aunt Margaret Stribling's quilt, close-up, ca. 1920s–1940s, Mississippi. Photograph by Tobi Hollander, 2018.

I was born in the 1970s, a chaotic time to be sure, but more hopeful by bounds than the 1920s, when my grandmother and her sisters were young. I never knew enslavement

firsthand, never experienced legal segregation, yet I savor the story of Margaret, her cow, and her quilt now more than ever. This fabric and the tale I associate with it have blanketed and anchored me, a reminder of dignity preserved, and of the hope in our dire times that something necessary for the preservation and elevation of life might, in the end, be saved.

There are myriad lessons in the story of the cow. What strikes me upon this telling, as I also ponder Ashley's sack, is the emphasis on girls and women, acts of rescue, and the salvaging of vital things that hold the deep meanings of our lives. This family story is about the resourcefulness of women and girls, even the most marginalized and maligned of them. It illustrates how the overburdened of the world can persist through unanticipated hardship. And this story suggests how instructive memories of perseverance from the past can be, especially when fastened to things that serve as aids of recall and connection.

I link the eviction to the quilt because of the heroine they have in common. In the case of Ashley's sack, the attachment is even more material. That story from the past is sewn directly onto the fabric. As the oft-quoted scholar of U.S. women's history Laurel Thatcher Ulrich recounts in her book *The Age of Homespun,* folks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sometimes affixed stories to objects, tucking fragments of paper about origins or events from the times into woven baskets, or pinning information about an object's owner onto the heels of woolen stockings, or even painting wordy descriptions onto wooden chests of drawers. This impulse to preserve past knowledge by hitching narrative explanation to items exhibits what Ulrich calls the "mnemonic power of goods."3 Things become bearers of memory and information, especially when enhanced by stories that expand their capacity to carry meaning.4 And if those things are textiles, stories about women's lives seem to adhere with special tenacity, even as fabrics, because of their vulnerability to deterioration and frequent lack of attribution to a maker, have been among the last kinds of materials that historians look to in order to understand what has occurred, how, and why.

My attachment to an ancestral quilt tethers me to the breathtaking weight of the African American past. Certainly, my own history is partly what drew me toward the sack, inspiring a wish to know the women behind the object and explore more deeply traditions of African American craft and family bequeathal. This is a feeling I'm sure to share with other women (and men) of Black, southern, rural, or crafting heritages. Many of us have felt in our lives the allure of the cloth as a twining cord connecting us to history. Some save and repair hand-me-down table linens. Others hunt the flea market aisles for vintage fabrics. A few of us learn the skills of traditional sewing and quilting to reproduce the experience and art of our foremothers. The past seems to reach out to us through these fabrics and the practices of

making them that have survived over time. Gathered up like crisp ends of a cotton sheet fresh from the washing, past and present seem to meet above the fold. We feel a sense of contact with the women who preceded us. We wonder if gaining knowledge about their lives can shine new perspective on our own. And as we discover the lives of these women from a time so different from ours, we enhance our ability to peer across other differences—of race and culture, class and status, ability and disability, youth and age. In this intermediate space where the fold of the fabric forms, we glimpse not only our foremothers' lives but also our foremothers' allies and adversaries. We begin to see the makeup of all their intersecting worlds and appreciate a larger swath of interwoven experience. We notice a shift from the self to the other, from personal and family history to local, national, and even global history. This dawning awareness leads us to trace all of the intertwined threads, to appreciate that there is one earth and one humankind, one social fabric of many folds in dire need of mending.

It may not be coincidence that we feel this expansion of self in the quaint attic rooms or antiques shops where we ponder the fibers that remain. An essential medium of social messaging, fabric announced information (often about social status), triggered memory (of events and people), and even bestowed protective magic (through embedded sacred material and shared belief). Before word processors, the printing press, and wood-pulp paper, cloth fashioned by women makers preserved the "mythohistories" of entire groups. Noblewomen spun thread on gold and silver spindles, fashioning tapestries with grand visual narration. In ancient Greece, Europe, and the Mediterranean, cloth did the work of retaining stories of distant kin, as women "recorded the deeds and/or myths of their clans in their weaving." These tapestries, laden with messages of historical events and mythological symbolism, bore a critical record-keeping and cultural function as "story cloths." While few ancient women had the luxury of twining their thread on golden spindles, the tradition of the story cloth of yore continues in the pieced quilts and cotton windowpane coverlets, embroidery samplers and crocheted afghans that we hand down through families with stories attached.

Though early women's history can be elusive, women need not "conjure a history for ourselves," says the archaeologist Elizabeth Wayland Barber. We do not have to magically pull our collective past out of thin air. "Very little of the ancient literary record was devoted to women," Barber continues. "Here among the textiles, on the other hand, we can find some of the hard evidence we need." Similarly, in her essay "African-American Women's Quilting," the historian Elsa Barkley Brown insists that if we "follow the cultural guides which African-American women have left us," we will "understand their world." Barber, a specialist in the ancient past, and Brown, a scholar of the recent past, agree on this: our

foremothers wove spiritual beliefs, cultural values, and historical knowledge into their flax, woolen, silk, and cotton webs. The work of their hands can lead us back to their histories and serve as guide rails as we grope through the difficult past. Here I attempt, alongside you, an unpredictable expedition into the lives of Black women during slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation, locating them in the contexts of their dynamic social worlds by tracing the threads of a story cloth. I seek to uncover the story of an enigmatic object and its makers; to explore the historical meanings of things in Black women's lives, Black lives, and women's lives; and to stitch into our cultural memory the chief values Rose upheld: love, hope, and salvation.